

Culture and Discourse: An American Buffet

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| journal or publication title | THE NAGOYA GAKUIN DAIGAKU RONSHU; Journal of Nagoya Gakuin University; LANGUAGE and CULTURE |
| volume | 24 |
| number | 2 |
| page range | 39-44 |
| year | 2013-03-31 |
| URL | http://doi.org/10.15012/00000469 |

Culture and Discourse: An American Buffet

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What follows is a discourse analysis of selected segments of talk primarily by American children with two elders at a buffet dinner in the United States. Selection relates to the concept of individualism-collectivism in view of potential comparative cultural study between the United States and Japan or East Asia. Some evidence, for example, is found for societal change in America in regard to whom pays for college—parent or child. Such issue strikes at the heart of the individualism-collectivism continuum, especially as it pertains to American and Japanese cultures. No claim is made for representativeness of the data; for this study is preliminary and remains suggestive. Its value lies in potential pedagogical use and pointing to further avenues for research.

As follow-up to discussion on collectivism-individualism in Donahue (1998) as well as to share a special cultural experience of mine recently, but more importantly to celebrate the career of Professor Shimizu, I reflect about an anecdote of being a recent guest at a restaurant buffet dinner in the U.S. A function of this present forum is for sharing within the NGU community, so as to acquaint people about one's research interests and activity. My purpose is to provide actual cultural behaviors through discourse to ultimately develop principles for understanding a target culture. This present article is but a seed toward later germination; for now I wish merely to share selected observations of the talk made by American children and how it may help illustrate certain facets of the collectivist-individualist divide of culture.

Recently, I was invited to a buffet dinner by my dear friend and former professor at a restaurant in a city where he resided in a mid-Atlantic state in the United States. The arrangement was that we would meet at the restaurant at 6 pm for dinner with two of his grandchildren, a boy 14 and a girl 11. Although traffic was heavy, I managed to get there five or ten minutes early. I didn't see them in the lobby, so I took a seat among the six or seven empty chairs there. I sat there until after 6 when I sensed something amiss. So I decided to check inside the dining area, a huge space already full. I did and luckily I spotted my friend—he was seated at a table and eating. We greeted and he explained that he had left word with the host to be on the lookout for me but evidently I was missed. My friend introduced me to his other three guests—his two grandchildren, a boy 14 and a girl 11. With her was

her friend, a girl 10. For present purposes, I give them all assumed names in order, Allen, Becky, and Carol; and Frank for the grandfather and professor. It was the conversations of, between, and with Becky and Carol that inspired me to present it.

My account is sketchy given the limits of my purely social purpose and that of the buffet experience itself. During the dinner I recognized the special significance of what was happening, and so made a point to remember some of the more memorable segments. The dialogue presented is not actual recordings but reconstructions. Further as I came to realize, the buffet puts much restriction on conversational interaction within your own party. As a result I present only several snatches of the most memorable aspects of the children's conversation. The topics include: sports, play, college, and dessert.

Discourse Extract 1

(Becky and Carol were talking about playing soccer into which I interject.)

Ray: Are you two on the same soccer team?

Carol: No, I'm on the Spectrum Level*. (**assumed name*)

Frank & Ray: What's the Spectrum Level?

Carol: It's just only [*eyes downcast*] I'm a little better than the others.

What struck me here was how Carol downplayed her own ability so as to preserve the face of her friend. She cast her eyes downward while doing it, perhaps to express humbleness or discomfort. Her discourse here seems laudable in the era of the self-esteem movement, an approach to education popularized over the past half-century (Craig, 2006). The aspect of self-esteem that has been emphasized is individual uniqueness and from a young age (Eagleson, 2009), an emphasis by schools that some consider an "obsession" (e.g., Bader, 2012; Will, 2010/2011). Understandably this emphasis seems to have given rise to young people characterized as "generation me" (e.g., Twenge, 2007). With this backdrop it is notable that Carol would minimize her own ability to save the face of her friend. Whether as result of such education or individualism, American children tend to spout about their own ability or accomplishment; not minimize it as would be a typical East Asian, especially Japanese, response.

Why Carol responded untypically could be gender related. A boy could be imagined to gloat about being better than his friend or peer, for boys are generally encouraged to be aggressive (or the PC "assertive") and outspoken. A well-known refrain heard by boys is the telling of others, "I'm better than you." Humorously it can be taken to the next level, "my dad is better than yours" and so on. If not gender-related for Carol, then it may be because she is younger than Becky, for she sometimes acted in a subordinate way to her friend. Or perhaps it could be because she was Becky's guest and wanted to act mannerly, but that was not my sense of it at the time. Anyway, this

snatch of conversation shows face-saving and cooperativeness despite the speaker is a member of an individualist culture (which is not to say that individualism and collectivism are mutually exclusive).

Discourse Extract 2

Ray: I didn't play soccer when I was your age; but I played baseball and football.

Becky: My parents and grandparents are lazy because they didn't play sports.

I was taken aback by Becky's comment about her own parents and grandparents, especially by her choice of word, "lazy." They certainly couldn't be for how she has been provided, as well as by their educational and professional attainments. Aside from this humorous aspect of the child's mind, would her comment have anything to do with the high importance placed on sports in American society?

Several world sports were given birth on American soil—baseball, basketball, American football, and volleyball. Sports teams, whether for good or ill, are emphasized at many high schools and colleges. Football stadiums that seat eighty- or a hundred thousand are not unusual on college campuses. Many of these schools employ cadres of coaching staffs, some of whom have salaries above a million dollars. And of course some sports figures rival the national president or other luminaries for popularity. Americans have a craziness for sports perhaps unparalleled elsewhere. If Becky's comment were representative of American children, it would be interesting to compare with that of her Asian counterparts in the same way.

Discourse extract 3

Becky: ... I would work here only if

Ray: (*to Frank*) Wow I didn't talk like that when I was their age!

Carol: (*to Ray*) I'm gonna pay for my college [*said confidently*]. I gotta a bank account for it and I'm saving.

Imagine children who are not even twelve talking about the preference of jobs—but not careers, but something more notable—part-time jobs! Children might imagine themselves as doctors, nurses, truck drivers or even astronauts but part-time workers?! Why I say part-time because Frank later offered the story about his daughter, Becky's mother, and echoed by Becky, that her mother had helped with her college costs by then working in a Chinese restaurant part-time. Because Becky knew the story and our own restaurant was Chinese, as well as because Carol chimed in by telling how she expected to pay her own college education, makes reasonable that the girls had part-time jobs in mind.

The special cultural significance is that we may be witness to an about-face in American society—parents are shifting responsibility for higher education costs onto their children (because these costs have become so inflated over the past twenty or thirty years). Surely many of these parents

would pay themselves but the financial burden has become too great. And the availability of college loans to students have ballooned to fill the gap. Some parents must be grooming their children at a young age with that idea in the same way that some Japanese parents groom their children to expect someday to take care of their aged parents. (Of course the nuclear family is well established in Japan but I have in mind certain messages that some Japanese parents instill in the child's mind about their future responsibility toward their aged parents.) This different view of parent responsibility is in stark contrast between Americans and Japanese. We can see individualism-collectivism at its core. Even before the crisis of college costs in America, the idea of a young person paying his or her way through college was an admirable ideal. In contrast, the collectivist Japanese parent tries to continue dependency by their children.

Discourse extract 4

Ray: (to Carol) What kind of ice cream is that? Blueberry?

Carol: No, [smilingly] it's huckleberry.

Ray: Ooh, you have a blue tongue! A blue tongue! [Carol looks at Becky and smiles]

People with blue eyes have blue tongues. [Carol has blue eyes]

Becky: (to Ray) You have blue eyes! [in countering tone; said matter of factly]

The significance here for us is not much. I included this because of Becky's challenge to an adult. She was telling me that I contradicted myself because I have blue eyes but didn't have a blue tongue. Would Asian children so readily contradict their elders as Becky did? Asian children, of course, are just as playful, so it would be interesting to chart out approximately when their "natural beings" metamorphized into "social beings," becoming more socially conscious about such things as age difference. It is not uncommon, for example, to hear a Japanese elder complain about their younger counterpart not paying enough respect especially through language honorifics.

Discourse extract 5

Becky: (to Frank, her grandfather) ... you change topics a lot ...

Here Becky's comment seems extraordinary for a child, suggesting she is precocious, if not a future communicologist! Because of how conversations can become fragmented at a buffet dinner and because Frank and I were listeners more than anything, I took her comment as reference to how she perceived his habits in general. Because they lived in the same house she was in good position to do so. On the other hand, just as she has been groomed or socialized to be futuristic about her responsibility for her own college education, her comment here may reflect hearsay from her mother. Her mother had been divorced until a recent remarriage, so both the mother and the professor Frank

probably loomed larger in the child's life in the absence of a father in the same household. Becky simply could be parroting what she had heard said by the mother about Frank.

And a word about the professor's way of introducing me to the children. It so happens that he had introduced me to the children as "Professor Donahue." This could have set some frame of formality on our collective behavior that I otherwise could not detect. I didn't mind so much but at that moment I felt a certain inconvenience. I hadn't expected being introduced in that way, for it was not a school situation. It would have been fine for him to address me by my first name, which he normally does. On the other hand, it is not unusual for adults to be addressed formally by "mister" to children. Interestingly, days later the professor laughed in saying that the two grandchildren had said that I talk just like him— "like a professor." And they were adamant about this by saying in unison, "yes." (I won't comment here, but an interesting sociolinguistic implication arises with the use of this "yes.")

Besides revealing again their precociousness, I reasoned that the professor's and my experience abroad effected us to enunciate our words. That alone can set us apart from other people. I myself at one time or other have been asked if I were British, a not uncommon comment heard by Americans who have lived extensively abroad, according to a report I once heard when I was at the East-West Center in Hawaii. But more remarkable by the children would be if they instead had observed our conversational patterns to be like classroom exchanges—questioning, reflection, feedback, and so on. Sometimes I made comment to Frank about what we were hearing as in Discourse Extract 3 above. After all, Frank and I are career educators, fathers, and he had framed me (in discourse terminology) as Professor Donahue from the very start. It could have affected all of our interactions in unknown ways, a matter necessary to consider. Nevertheless having such limitations and as mundane as it may be, the discourse seems replete with features that could yield by further investigation and analysis important discovery about culture and discourse.

Conclusion

Several snatches of authentic discourse of American children have been presented for potential cultural contrastive purposes as well as to explore the important cultural concepts of individualism and collectivism. We noted a reflection of a potentially significant societal change in the U.S. concerning who pays for college tuition costs—parents or children. The children appeared precocious for keen observation of adult behavior and conversational habit. However, it must be tempered by the possibility that they borrowed what they had heard their parent once say. They did at least show keen observation that this author and his friend the professor shared similar ways of speaking. (But again there is an alternative explanation as indicated.) This seemingly detached critical view of the elder by the child might be a reflection of individualist, egalitarian culture. To what extent Asian culture would match would be interesting. (Representativeness of data becomes an issue, of course, but research

must start somewhere.) Because East Asians are known to dote on their children, thus elevating them in some way, the comparison with Americans would be made more complex. In the meantime, the discourse examined could serve as illustrations of the individualism-collectivism concept provided the instructor uses them judiciously; as well as intriguing matter for future research.

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